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Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "SEASON PREVIEW: Georgia Southern Softball Powers Its Way Into 2020" (2020). *Athletics News*. 3200.

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Georgia Southern University Athletics



SEASON PREVIEW: Georgia Southern Softball Powers Its Way Into 2020
Eagles setting sights on Sun Belt success with talented squad of veterans and newcomers
Softball
Posted: 2/6/2020 2:00:00 PM

STATESBORO - The headlines surrounding the Georgia Southern softball program in 2019 dealt a lot with the school-record 49 home runs clubbed by the Eagles over the course of the season.

Head coach [Kim Dean](#), in her third season at the helm of the program, expects that power output to continue in 2020 - but also expects the Eagles to show well in other areas to put Georgia Southern on the path to success in the always rigorous Sun Belt Conference.

"I think our overall production is going to go up," Dean said. "I won't go as far as to say that we'll break the home run record again, but it wouldn't surprise me if we did. It's just not our main focus this year. We're looking for consistency in our lineup, which I think is going to be more powerful this year."

That lineup begins with the most experienced returner for the Eagles in senior center fielder [Mekhia Freeman](#). Selected as a 2020 Preseason All-Sun Belt Conference honoree for the second time in her career, Freeman hit .325 as a junior and her career .326 batting average is fifth-best in Georgia Southern softball history. She is also on pace to become just the fifth player in school history to collect 200 career hits.

Freeman spotlights a group of seniors who will be counted on to lead both on and off the field. Outfielders [Shayla Smith](#) and [Ellington Day](#), infielder [Alia Booth](#) and catcher [Sydney Horton](#) are all transfers who have just one season of experience with the Eagles, but have bought into Coach Dean's aspirations for the 2020 season wholeheartedly.

"All of them are really good teammates this year," Dean said. "All of them talk a lot about wanting to enjoy the season. When we talked about goals, every upperclassman talked about the bond they wanted to form with their teammates. I felt that was awesome."

In addition to the five seniors, three juniors - pitcher [Rylee Waldrep](#), catcher [Allyssah Mullis](#) and East Georgia State transfer pitcher [Harlee Rewis](#) - give Georgia Southern just eight upperclassmen in the full roster of 22 players set to take the field in 2020. Coach Dean knows the effect that will have on her squad coming into the year.

"We have a very young team, but we have a lot of very experienced players in the innings they've played," Dean said. "We are going to be extraordinarily young defensively, but that's no excuse. Defense is a huge part of my philosophy, and I thoroughly expect us to be a better defensive team this year."

Pitching-wise, the Eagles have the luxury of four pitchers who saw innings for the team last season returning, headlined by Waldrep. Sophomores [Shelby Barfield](#), [Jess Mazur](#) and [Ashleigh Morton](#) all had their shares of success as freshman in the circle and adding to the corps will be freshmen [Aaliyah Garcia](#) (Angleton, Texas) and [Kyleigh Richardson](#) (Stafford, Va.) along with junior college transfer Rewis.

"Dani [Price, pitching coach] and I are very strategic minded, and open-minded to doing it a different way," Dean said about her team's pitching in 2020. "I think we'll see a little bit of everything from our pitchers. We want to win ball games by pitching to the strength of our defense and the weaknesses of the other team's hitters."

The right side of the infield for Georgia Southern sports a pair of sophomores who had solid debut seasons for the Eagles in 2019 - first baseman [Faith Shirley](#) and second baseman [Ashlynn Gunter](#). Shirley clubbed 10 home runs, tying the freshman home run record set by Crystal Crews in 2002. Gunter made 35 starts as a freshman and made just four errors on the season in 129 chances.

The left side of the infield will be brand new following the graduation of third baseman [Hannah Farrell](#) and shortstop [Macy Coleman](#). Getting first crack at those positions will be a pair of freshmen - third baseman [Bailee Wilson](#) (Clyo, Ga.) and shortstop [Olivia Creamer](#) (St. Johns, Fla.). Wilson is the younger sister of Georgia Southern softball standout [Shelby Wilson](#) and comes in as the four-time Region Player of the Year at Effingham County HS, while Creamer was a two-time All-First Coast selection at Bartram Trail HS.

The outfield will see Freeman again patrolling center field, while seniors Day, Smith and Booth will also see time at the corner outfield spots. Freshmen [Alisha House](#) (Woodstock, Ga.), [Ashleigh Duty](#) (Hamilton, Ga.) and Richardson, along with sophomore North Central Texas College transfer [Mary Grace Howard](#) will compete for innings and at-bats as well.

Catching is admittedly the biggest challenge for Coach Dean and the Eagles after losing senior [Logan Harrell](#) to graduation. Junior [Allyssah Mullis](#), senior [Sydney Horton](#) and freshmen [Linzie Lafavor](#) and [Janai Conklin](#) make up the catching corps for Georgia Southern in 2020.

"We've been focused on the relationship between the catchers and our pitchers," Dean said. "Allyssah is the most experienced, but she only has a handful of games behind the plate. It hasn't been difficult getting those relationships built, but we acknowledged early on that it was a priority."

The Eagles have been picked to finish seventh in a preseason poll of the league's coaches. Georgia Southern finished seventh in 2019 with a 9-17 Sun Belt record along with its 23-28 overall record.

One of the team's goals this season is to break through and win that first Sun Belt Conference tournament contest. Since joining the league in 2015, Georgia Southern has advanced to the tournament five straight seasons, but has lost all of its first-round games - and four of the five games by a margin of just one run.

Play begins for the Eagles on Feb. 7-9, hosting the Bash In The Boro tournament at Eagle Field. [Visit the tournament site here and follow along with all the action via GSEagles.com](#). Georgia Southern also hosts the Eagle Round Robin on Feb. 21-23 and, in addition to the Sun Belt home schedule, will also welcome in Mercer and Boston College for midweek games. The Eagles will play non-conference contests at South Carolina, Kennesaw State, the College of Charleston and Furman and also play road tournaments at Auburn and at Disney's Wide World of Sports Complex.

"We broke up the weekends this year with our home tournaments," Dean said. "It gets us on the road early, and we're really excited to be playing the teams we are. We have a tough schedule to end February, at South Carolina and then at Auburn. But all of us, the coaches, smiled and said 'let's go.' We're also excited to have two Big 10 teams [Rutgers, Maryland] and an ACC team [Boston College] coming to Eagle Field, that adds a little more excitement to our home games."

Coach Dean and the Eagles have many barometers for success for the upcoming season, a series of self-determined 'championships' that the team decided upon in the preseason. But the biggest one may be those bonds, those relationships the seniors talked about at the outset of the year. "I think if we still all love each other at the end of the year, it will be a successful season," Dean said. "I say that with a smile, but it is a long season, filled with tough conversations, beat up bodies and minds. But if in May, we can all still hug each other, we will have done what we need to do to move forward."

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